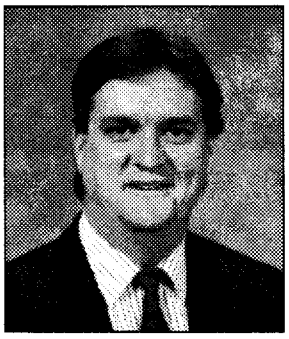
London *can* be the most-connected city-here's how:

By Jim Carroll



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I am a native of London—indeed, I grew up in Byron from 1960 to 1972.

And I have many fond memories of the Byron Public Library as a kid, working at a table on a school project, or of being curled up in the corner chair that overlooks the Thames River while reading.

Librarians taught me how to scan through the card catalogue in order to discover the books, periodicals or other information sources that would help me to get an answer to some type of question. I learned how to start out with a subject in an encyclopedia, and from there, discover other related information on the shelves. I remember scanning through microfilm copies of the *London Free Press*, and of voyaging on occasion to the main library downtown—and of being in awe at its size and scope.

For me, the London Public Library provided a key component of the skills I would later need for university and beyond. And by establishing the library system, the City of London and its many corporate partners provided me, as a youth, with the information infrastructure I needed to gather knowledge.

Even though I have long moved away from London, I think that a community such as London now is faced with an extremely interesting question—what role should government and industry play in providing to its citizens an information infrastructure for the future?

The knowledge worker of the future

I now work out of a wired home located in Mississauga, Ont. A chartered accountant, I spent 12 years with the world's largest public accounting firm before establishing my own home-based consulting firm in 1990.

Today, the world has changed around me in dramatic fashion. I still go the library regularly and expect to do so for many years to come. Yet my many research skills have expanded beyond the physical library, to the massive worldwide base of information as found in the Internet and beyond. I can instantly research tens of thousands of magazines and newspapers, and can electronically scan developments affecting particular projects I might be involved in. I can plug into the emerging world economy as found in the Internet, and interact with my clients, business partners and others wherever they may be.

I am convinced that one of the reasons I have managed to establish a thriving and profitable consulting practice is that I have mastered the ability of just-in-time knowledge, through the use of global information networks such as the Internet. I have equipped myself with the best darn technology I could, since I am convinced that to be a participant in the wired world, I must have what it takes.

Today, my office environment is indicative of the type of work quarters that many other people are establishing for themselves. My home features a separate office, and a high-speed local area network that extends to every room in the house, with up to six computers linked in at any one time. A high-speed connection to the Internet, three phone lines, and other communication tools plug me into the world.

I am a nomadic worker, able to be a full participant in an economy that is becoming increasingly wired together. I am no techo-dweeb, but a business executive carving out a highly lucrative, profitable and fun career in the wired world.

The information age

I think business, government and education leaders must be cognizant of the implications of a world economy that is based upon telecommunications. And they must be prepared to provide an infrastructure to their citizens which allows them to be full participants—for otherwise, they will see the world pass them by.

There is a poster that hangs on my office wall which states that "learning is what most adults will do for a living in the 21st century." I firmly believe this to be true.

Yet I think that, while there is a lot of recognition that a community needs to do something to get ready for the 21st century, there is not a lot of action beyond the talk. And I have no doubt that politicians and business leaders

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high-speed network connections through the heart of the city. In other cases, it is expanding the links to the outside world. The town of Sioux Lookout, Ont., got together to convince Bell Canada of the need for high-speed Internet connectivity, recognizing that this will let them plug into the future world economy. Large and small, cities and towns are putting in place every darned type of telecommunication link they can—and creating an environment that encourages them to do so.

Hence, the second thing I would recommend a CIO of the City of London do is to do everything possible to wire the city with every type of advanced communication network that exists. I would bring in organizations such as Bell Canada and Rogers Cable, and bluntly ask them what barriers would have to be removed in order to permit them to expand their networks throughout the city. Then I would set about to remove those barriers.

I would also invite the folks at London Hydro in for a talk, and discuss plans like their counterparts at Toronto Hydro, an organization which is putting in place an optic fibre loop throughout their downtown electrical conduits. And I would call up the chief executive officers of emerging communication powerhouses such as MetroNet, which is wiring the city of Montreal, to see if they wanted to put London on the top of their list for expansion.

Heck, I would call every darn company in the communications business in Canada, and tell them that the City of London is wide open for high-tech, high-speed bandwidth. I would do everything in my power to remove any of the perceived regulatory or other barriers that might be in their way.

3. Enhance the infrastructure, part 2. I would also launch NetDay London, an initiative modeled on the U.S. NetDay initiative. The city would dedicate one day to the goal of wiring the city. Volunteers from the technology community would wire every school, business and library they could with network cabling, recognizing that, even as large-scale networks are built throughout the city, small-scale networks are just as important.

4. Educate the movers and shakers. As these efforts got under way, I would spend some time to convince the decision-makers in the city as to the need for London to become the most wired city in Canada.

I find that while many senior government and business executives can certainly speak to the future with a brave face, few of them really know what we mean by the "knowledge economy." Hence, my fourth program for the CIO of London would be to provide them a crash course as to what this new era is all about.

I would make them aware that Singapore is probably one of the greatest threats to the future economic health of the City of London. Government, business and education leaders in that city-state have convinced themselves that the future potential of their economic system is determined by its ability to plug in. And I would help them see that London will increasingly lose out to New Brunswick and other wired communities if it cannot plug in.

I would teach them about the co-operative efforts that are under way in communities worldwide, and help them understand that if London does not plug in, in a major way, it would be equivalent to a community that did not find itself on the main rail line in the 1800s–most of which died or suffered as a result.

5. Upgrade the skills and capabilities of community builders. The entire community of London will not be able to move forward in establishing the infrastructure and capabilities necessary to the knowledge economy—unless those who are responsible for upgrading the skills of the rest of the people in the city are comfortable with the technology that will make it up.

I would hazard a guess that many people throughout the city still struggle with technology—particularly, teachers, librarians, social workers, municipal officials, and others who deal with the citizens of London on a regular basis.

The fifth thing I would suggest the CIO of London do is use the NetDay London opportunity to provide education, training and background for these community builders as to what the wired economy is all about—and to assist them in getting over the many technology hurdles that they face on a day-to-day basis.

6. Forge a community consensus. London can only be a player in the new emerging wired economy if there is a real commitment to move forward. This means that government, business, and academia have to be prepared to work together to move forward. Spend time to get commitment and consensus that London wants to plug into the future—and that teamwork will be the only method by which this will be accomplished.

7. Learn the secrets of the leaders. The seventh thing I would recommend the CIO of London do is find out what other communities are doing the best job—and learn from their success. Out in the world of business, we have a buzzword for how to go about doing the best job you can with any particular new initiative. It is called "best-practices" research, and it simply means that you find out who is doing the best darned job with something—and emulate what they do.

8. Establish a set of community goals. This would allow the partners to establish the goals for the city in the short, medium, and long term. I would get commitment to those goals from all players in the City of London.

9. Provide sources of funding. Business and government in the City of London must be prepared to fund any activities that might come about. You cannot just talk about the future—you have to be willing to spend to achieve it. I would get that commitment.

10. Encourage participation—volunteerism, students, Western and Fanshawe communities; and everyone with untapped potential. I would declare to the emerging wired economy that the City of London is open for business—and would spread that message far and wide.

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alike must come to recognize that we are still at an extremely early stage with the wired economy—and must realize that the decisions they take today towards becoming a knowledge-based community of the future, will be absolutely critical to the future success of that community.

That is why I believe the City of London must begin to establish an infrastructure that supports the information society that is emerging in the new millennium, much as it has provided other information infrastructures in the past.

I question whether it is doing so—certainly, I do not see the same efforts in London that I see in other communities across the country.

The need to adapt

I spend a lot of time travelling the country, speaking to executives, associations, professionals and other people about the change that is being wrought upon our lives as a result of the emergence of what I call the "wired world."

I am convinced that the world of business will change around us in dramatic fashion as the wired economy of the future takes hold—and that the very nature of the organization is going to change as the tools of the wired world make the location of the worker irrelevant.

I think we are headed for an economic system in which companies will hire the best talent they can, regardless of where that person might be. Indeed, in the new millennium, where people work from will not matter—since you will simply have to plug into the global economy in order to take part. I see the emergence of a new type of "nomadic worker," one who will make career decisions that are based on lifestyle. These workers will have different attitudes towards life and work, and will reject many of the currently accepted norms of the corporate environment—and their attitudes will revolutionize the world of work.

Certainly, one of the most important attitudes of these nomadic workers is the knowledge that they can make their expertise available electronically to any organization on the planet. This means they will come to reject the idea of living in the massive urban centers of today, with their crime, traffic and other problems. Instead, they will choose to work from wherever they want to—and communities will be able to draw them based upon the amenities they can offer—including their telecommunications capability.

As the millennium evolves, I have no doubt that job creation and economic opportunity will increasingly be less dependent on the traditional infrastructure of a community, and more so on the ability to plug into the future. Technology improvements, particularly with emerging satellite technologies, will render irrelevant the old distinction between urban and rural environments. This means that the traditional manner by which we judge quality of life in a community—health care, education, infrastructure, geographic proximity—will come to include consideration of telecommunications capability.

And this means that those communities which can best create a buzz as to their telecommunication attributes will be those who best succeed in the emerging wired economy.

Success will only come to those communities which can foster a creative approach between industry, business, government and academia in their approach to the opportunity afforded by the wired economy.

The CIO:

Which leads to the question, "What should a chief information officer (CIO) of London, charged with the responsibility of dragging the community kicking and screaming into the future, be doing?"

Several things:

1. Establish a buzz. I travel the country incessantly, providing speeches to business organizations, associations and individuals who have an interest in understanding where our new wired economy is headed. The result is that I end up talking to a lot of people as to what is happening in terms of in Canada—and about the perceptions that people have as to which communities are successfully positioning themselves for the future.

Unfortunately, London does not register in the minds of many people—business executives, politicians and other movers and shakers—as a particularly innovative leader in terms of being a wired community. Oh, you have Internet connectivity, and there are certainly projects happening at the University of Western Ontario and within the hospitals in terms of high-speed communications.

But when it comes to the future, there is no buzz about London like there is about some other parts of the country.

Who has the buzz? New Brunswick, for one—through the vision of a fellow like Frank McKenna, the private sector involvement of Fundy Cable and NBTel, and through the efforts of others in industry and education, the province is wired to the hilt. It has probably drawn more high-tech jobs on a per capita basis than any other location in Canada. Ottawa is another—it is often referred to as Silicon Valley North. Vancouver—for the fact that we are seeing a lot of honest-to-goodness software development out there.

London? It just does not seem to have the same buzz. If you want to be a player, you have to have people talking about you.

2. Continue to enhance the infrastructure—part 1. If you really want to establish yourself in the wired economy of the future, you have be prepared to build the infrastructure that is required.

Many cities and towns—and indeed, the entire province of New Brunswick—are rapidly putting in place high-speed communication backbones, in order to provide an infrastructure that supports the data flows that will drive the wired economy.

Sometimes this is being done by wiring the downtown core. From my perspective, the city of Calgary certainly ranks as a knowledge city of the future—communication companies there are actively putting in place some pretty good